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ABSTRACT

Noting the discrepancy between what is advocated and what is practiced in language arts classroom, this Digest synthesizes the existing problems, reviews the research supporting language arts integration, and proposes a rationale for integrating the language arts. The Digest points out that these new initiatives in language arts focus on the learner and the processes that the learner uses to comprehend the written word or to write a composition and that this shifts the instructional focus from gaining language proficiency to using language as a tool for learning desirable content. Contains 12 references. (NKA)

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Integrating the Language Arts

by Carl B. Smith

Many educators trace the rise in interest for integrating language arts to the success of the integrated curriculum in Great Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. British students were encouraged to communicate in writing and to talk about their writing. Some educators point back to the curriculum reform movement of the 1930s and to Dewey's discussion of meaningful learning as the beginning of interest in language arts integration (Lipson et al, 1993). In the United States, a close relationship between language and cognition was also found (Thaiss, 1984). However, while teachers generally favor an integrated approach, only minimal amounts of integration actually occur in their instruction (Schmidt et al, 1985; Allen and Kellner, 1983). Noticing this discrepancy between what is advocated and what is practiced in language arts classrooms, this *Digest* will synthesize the existing problems, review the research supporting language arts integration, and propose a rationale for integrating language arts.

Problems in Integration Applications

As Melle and Wilson (1984) have stated, one of the difficulties in the application of integrating the language arts is that teachers generally are not prepared to undertake such a change and are not familiar with the related teaching techniques. Therefore, they consider such moves to be revolutionary and lack the confidence to replace their traditional instruction with new techniques. Also, the public school system in the United States, which sets up rigid constraints on time, curricular content, and planning, discourages teachers' efforts to integrate language arts (Kutz et al, 1983). For example, time constraints, skill-oriented instruction for "back to the basics," and the traditional hierarchy between teacher and students all lead to inflexibility. Finally, the public's excessive trust in "teacher-proof" learning programs, along with the so-called "objectivity" of quantifiable evaluations, reinforce the teacher's lack of confidence in her abilities and judgments to create an integrated curriculum.

Since, in order to change one's actions, one's thinking must change first, it would be prudent to examine the pedagogical research on language theories. It can help us think of those classroom practices which will allow us to implement ideas in the classroom and therefore eliminate the disparity between theory and practice.

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Review of the Research

Based on a description of the rich and varied concept formations and representations in our mind, Eisner (1982) concludes that no single form of representation, words, pictures, music, mathematics, or dance, is in itself complete for learners to experience the construction of various meanings and expressions.

Therefore, Eisner (and Pappas, 1995) advocate an expanded literacy curriculum in order to cultivate and refine learners' different senses across the subject areas of language, science, music, social studies, dance, math, etc. As learners have access to and acquire competence in dealing with the information embedded within multiple forms of representation, they become increasingly able to differentiate and able to learn more from the process of comparison and contrast through cognitive and affective experiences. An integrated language arts curriculum establishes an environment with which the world is presented and understood through various actions, such as speaking, writing, listening, reading, drawing, computing, dancing. The goal is, as Sir Herbert Read has pointed out (in Eisner), "to help children become what they are." Student potential can be realized in a rich and integrated environment.

The connections between oral and written language enable learners to learn language, learn about language, and learn through language, as Lyle (1993) and Hong and Aiex (1995) have noted.

Thaiss's ERIC *Digest* on "Language across the Curriculum (1984) points out that integration is necessary if learners are to gain power in reading, speaking, writing, and listening: to make use of the interrelationship of these modes; and to unite the inseparableness of language, thinking, and learning. Because of this intimate intercon-nection between mind and language and between oral and written language, Busch and Jenkins (1982) and Wagner (1989) propose a whole language approach which integrates various language arts experiences. On the one hand, their approach values the social aspect of language for people's interaction and communication; on the other hand, it values the personal aspect of language for one's thinking, understanding, and learning of different subject matters.

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Principles and Practices of Integrated Language Arts

Recently, the cry for greater curriculum integration has prompted many schools to adopt an integrated language arts approach. This shifts the instructional focus from gaining language proficiency to using language as a tool for learning desirable content.

Perhaps students want to learn about the migratory patterns of whales—they raise questions about whales, read about whales, discuss solutions about their questions, take notes, write summaries of their discussions, and share their learning. All forms of language are used in a natural pursuit of knowledge. There is no artificial separation of writing from spelling, of literature from grammar. Students read and write as they explore issues. They integrate the language arts.

These new initiatives in language arts focus on the learner and on the processes that the learner uses to comprehend the written word or to write a composition. In fact, some theorists go so far as to say that children will learn to read and write on their own if their education at home and at school promotes communication, not skill development. If there are books in the classroom, if children are encouraged to share their book experiences with others, if children are urged to write to each other about their experiences, and if they are directed to make sense out of their numerous literacy activities, they will learn to read and write effectively and naturally—by doing it.

The Reading/Writing Process

The most popular heuristic device for explaining the reading/writing process uses the sequence words "before," "during," and "after," though theorists are quick to point out that a cognitive process is not a clean sequence of events. It is helpful, however, to think of communication in terms of what the reader/writer does as he/she approaches the task ("before"), what he /she does to make the communication coherent ("during"), and what he/she does to consolidate the communication ("after").

Throughout this century, reading instruction methodology has referred to a reading process. Building background, reading for a purpose, and reviewing reading have been a part of teacher training and of basal reader textbooks since the 1920s. But these earlier efforts at defining the reading process seemed to be teacher-directed, whereas the current theories emphasize learners' efforts.

They are the ones who must ask themselves what prior knowledge they have that fits the approaching topic. They are the ones who have to set purpose and ask themselves if they are making sense of the passage. They are the ones who need to adjust their strategies to make the passage meaningful. And they are the ones who need to apply the ideas in their own world and give them some personal value. By making the learner responsible for building meaning (reading) or responsible for communicating meaning (writing) the teacher moves from the front of the room to the middle of the room. Instead of controlling the meaning of communication, the teacher asks students what meaning they have discovered.

Principles and Beliefs

We can arrive at principles and assumptions for an integrated language arts curriculum by examining the beliefs that guide our actions. If we believe, for example, that schools should promote Dewey's concept of the learner as explorer—a curious person who constantly seeks answers to personal questions—then operating principles will promote that belief. If we believe that learners should explore issues together, interacting with text and with each other in a seamless use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing, then language arts learning will be integrated through themes, activities, and materials that support thematic, collaborative learning. Articulating our pedagogical beliefs as explicitly as possible is the first step toward guided decision making.

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